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Through The Esses - Tom Long's Enthusiasm For Racing Is Automatic

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This column is the 100th written while we have been affiliated with TheRaceSite.com. Over the years we have had the opportunity to talk with many great and interesting people in the sport of road racing and we can honestly say we have never come across anyone who could be considered truly difficult or aloof. We have found that most people welcome the opportunity to talk openly about themselves and their careers and that has made this experience an extremely enjoyable one for us.



Andrew S. Hartwell / ashautomobilia.com



Courtesy SCCA

Along the way we have met several people who simply exuded enthusiasm about their chosen profession. We find that refreshing and we have tried to make sure that enthusiasm was translated effectively through the column we created about them.

Recently we spent time talking with a young man who, quite probably, ranks right up there as being among the most enthusiastic spirits we have ever met. His name is Tom Long, he is 25 years old, and he drives a BMW M3 for Automatic Racing in the KONI Challenge Series.

Long was so wound up about telling us his story that we had to switch to back up tapes in our recorder to capture all he had to say. Were our ears tired in the end? A bit, but we couldn't help but come away from the conversation with an appreciation for the energy and sincerity with which he delivered his words.

For this edition of Through The Esses, we are going to let his comments just sort of flow along in a manner very much like the manner in which we received them. That is, what follows pretty much requires little in the way of framing by us, for Long has essentially delivered an autobiography of his career. All we really had to do was type it up.

We will start it off by telling you Long grew up in Poughkeepsie, New York, a town about 80 miles or so north of New York City, and about 40 miles west of the Lime Rock Park racing circuit. His start in racing was as the son of an amateur racer who attended his father's races and helped around the paddock. He soon caught the bug to drive and after a short stint with karts, and years of tooling around in SCCA racing, he eventually came to be driving his dream – as a member of the Automatic Racing team running in the KONI Challenge.

Now, let's turn this story over to him.

"I enjoyed growing up in Poughkeepsie. I had a lot of friends up there and we had plenty of winter sports. But I live in North Carolina now so I don't get to enjoy skiing as much as I did then. I grew up with my dad involved in SCCA Club racing so we were often up at Lime Rock and Watkins Glen. There were four of us in the family, my dad and mom, me, and my younger brother Chris, who is two years younger than me.

"Chris didn't have an interest in cars in the beginning but as he grew up he developed an interest and he worked on some classic cars. He even got himself a little Cosworth Vega which of course wasn't the most exciting car around! But the Cosworth engine made it special and he built it up himself. That made him decide he wanted to be a mechanical engineer. He went to the same school I went to, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He now works for the Chip Ganassi stock car team. He is helping them develop their car of tomorrow.

"He and I are sort of at opposite ends of the racing spectrum. He is more involved in the engineering side of things and I am the more personable driver type.

"I was in elementary school when I used to go to the races with my dad. It became my passion as I would eat, breathe and sleep racing. It was always something. If I could watch races on TV I would, or if I could go to the track I would watch the action as long as I could. I know a lot of kids wouldn't be that interested at that age but I was always talking about cars.

"When we moved to North Carolina my dad ended up selling his race car. I was around 13 or so at the time, and I started to fall out of touch with racing a little bit, only because we didn't go to the races as much because we really didn't have a way to go. But when I got to be 16 I got my first car, a 1988 Acura Integra. It wasn't much of a car but it was fun to play around with and do all the fun things to it like the suspension and exhaust and all that. I managed to get to the track with club driving events. That was something we could share. By then he too had a car he could drive on the track. The whole deal was having a volunteer instructor riding along with you. That was how I really got started as a driver.

"It was so neat to watch racing for so many years and then finally have the chance to drive on the track. I feel I was able to get up to speed rather quickly because I was able to translate a lot of what I saw spectating into driving. A lot of things just made sense to me because I remembered watching them. Many things were inherent to me and I felt I already understood it before I was actually driving. It was a really interesting experience and I had a lot of exciting moments.

"I sold the Acura after it got a bit long in the tooth. I think it had about 170,000 miles on it! I bought a Honda Civic SI my senior year in high school. Ironically enough it fit into the SCCA Showroom Stock class. After driving it on the track in club events and on track days, my dad and I decided we could put a roll cage and racing seat in it and go showroom stock racing with it. In the beginning, we got an open trailer and towed it behind my dad's Chevy Suburban.

"I used that car at college too, driving it around with the roll cage and all still inside it. We ran regional races in 2001 in Showroom Stock. The advantage was I knew the car really well and I knew a lot of the tracks. The driving schools and club events were cheap and easy track time. We went to Savannah and VIR and all the southeast tracks. I went to an SCCA racing school at Summit Point and VIR and got my license there.

"I did do a year of karts when we lived in Virginia for a year or two. My dad would get transferred around in his job. It's a bit confusing but we lived in New York, and then moved to Virginia, then back to New York again, before we moved to North Carolina. I ran a junior class kart at a local track in Northern Virginia. It was a fun experience and, looking back at it, it really taught me a lot of the basics of vehicle dynamics. I learned a lot and I won a local championship when I was 11. We later sold the kart when we moved back to New York.

"After running the Civic in the SCCA Regionals for a year we decided to run it in the Nationals. I got on the podium at the runoffs and that was a highlight of my career to that point. I thought, 'This is great, now how do I parlay this into something bigger?' We needed to find something with a small budget and Spec Miata was just coming along.

"The Pro Miata Cup came into being in 2003 and we sold the Civic and bought a Spec Miata to enter the series in 2004. Running in the series was very cost effective because they had just four race weekends, but they ran two races at each track making it an eight race season. In the second year they added a fifth weekend.

"But what appealed to me was the exposure we got running on the same weekends with Grand-Am and SPEED World Challenge. It gave us the opportunity to develop relationships with some of those teams. It also had us running in front of bigger crowds which gave us even more experience. And I won my first pro race at Lime Rock during the Memorial Day weekend. That was an extra special time because, growing up in New York, Lime Rock was a home track to me. I literally grew up on that hill that overlooks the esses there. To win a pro race there was just so special and so much fun.

"That year we ended up third overall in the championship so we decided to run again in 2005 and go for the championship. We teamed up with Bert Mills, who had a very impressive crew chief background, to help us with setting up the car.

"The Miata series had a great support system. Hankook was the tire supplier and if you did really well, Mazda gave you some money as did SCCA. That helped to cover your travel expenses. Then Hankook would give us four tires if we won a race and so you could end up getting free tires for the next race weekend. It worked out really well and while we were spending on a small budget, we recouped most of our expenses. It was really great.

"And bringing Bert Mills on board to help us with set up really put us on track to go for the win every time out. The first race of the year we battled for the lead at Road Atlanta and coming in three wide on the last lap we got shoved off the track and spun out on the grass. That dropped us off the podium and down to 22nd overall. We thought, 'Oh great, first race of the year, there are 10 races to go and this was not the way to start.'

"But from that point on, we were on the podium in every single race the rest of the year! We had a few poles and a few wins and 9 of 10 podiums. We won the Atlantic Championship on the last lap of the last race. It was at Mid Ohio during the Grand-Am weekend. That year they had a National Championship race on the weekend of the Petit Le Mans at Road Atlanta. In that race we passed on the last turn of the last lap and won the National Championship. It was huge and

so much fun because we had a lot of family and friends there. It was a jaw-dropping and heart-pounding experience because I had just won a professional National Championship!

“We had a neat banquet at the Chateau Elan that evening and it was just the most special day of my whole career. It still means a lot to me to think about it and to know I got to share that day with my family.

“Surprisingly though, Chip Ganassi didn’t call me to drive his Daytona Prototype! Yeah, right!

“So we sold the Miata and we were hoping that the rumors about Mazda giving away some of its new MX-5 cars were true and that we might get one. Unfortunately that never came to fruition. We started courting sponsors because we knew the budget for the MX-5 series would be expensive. Over the summer I had worked for a local Star Mazda team, Velocity Motorsports. One of the drivers with them, Glenn Bocchino, told me he was going to buy a pair of Acura TSX’s to run in Grand-Am Cup. He had kept up with following my career and he asked me if I would be interested in helping him build and set up his cars with the chance that I might get to drive. Well, that was my goal, to get into SPEED Challenge or Grand-Am Cup so I jumped at the opportunity.

“Roger Foo built the cars out in California. In 2006 I flew out there and lived in California for about two months to help build the cars and get the cars to the race track. We tested at the local road courses and did some tuning and development work. Our first race was at Laguna Seca.

“I ran the team’s second car and had a difficult weekend. We had issues with the ABS and some other things, but it was a really neat experience. I had never run at Laguna Seca before. I had heard and read all about it, and I played it on a video game, but it was so exciting to go to such a famous track and be racing in the Grand-Am Cup! It was the biggest deal in the world for me to do that. Even though we ended up in the mid-20s somewhere, it was such an incredible opportunity just to be there.

“The next weekend we ran at Phoenix. My co-driver worked for Honda R&D and he was another integral part of getting the cars ready to race. Unfortunately the car blew up on him on the third lap of practice so I never got into the car that weekend. I wound up spotting for the main car that Roger and Glenn were driving. They had a top 10 finish in what was just their second race. Unfortunately, the team was tight on budget after that, which meant the deal for me just kind of went away.

“After that I went up to Lime Rock and thought I would try to look around for a ride. It turned out there was a ride in a BMW Z4 available. Ian Bass, who had just won the 24 hours of Daytona with Randy Pobst, was there driving a GT car. He had not been to Lime Rock before so he wanted to get some extra seat time. He had the Z4 but no co-driver so I wound up working out a deal with the car’s owner to be his co-driver for the weekend. Man, that car handled so well – it was such a momentum car on a momentum track - that we wound up running in the top five in every practice session, qualifying and the race.

“Ian did a great job and if we hadn’t missed a call on a pit stop we would have finished higher than the 10th place result. The impressive result paid off because Anthony Serra who is the team manager for Davis Motorsports was impressed with my effort. He asked me to test with the team at the next race, Mid-Ohio.

“The test day was nerve-wracking for me. I had never been in the situation where somebody was testing me and I had to do well to get the ride. It ended up raining that afternoon but we

were quickest on the time sheets. He was impressed. There were 80 cars there trying to get 60 spots. My co-driver and I had lackluster results in the race however, as he went down a lap before I got in the car. I couldn't get that lap back so we wound up in the top 20.

"But Anthony was happy with my performance and I ended up with the ride for the rest of the year. I thought it was great of him to give me that opportunity. We had some solid performances and I know I learned a lot just racing in the series. There were a lot of subtle things you don't pick up in sprint racing.

"Looking for an opportunity for 2007 I thought of Dave Russell. I knew him well because we worked as instructors at the BMW Performance Center in Spartanburg, South Carolina together. He was the team manager for the Automatic Racing team that runs BMW M3s in the KONI Challenge. I also knew Jep Thornton, the team owner, because he had actually done a few races with the Velocity Motorsports Star Mazda team. I had been a coach for him back then.

"The Department of Florida Agriculture 'Fresh from Florida' campaign was considering getting into racing as a sponsor. They were looking for a Florida based race team as they planned to attend many promotional functions and the team cars would have to be available. When Automatic Racing received the sponsorship bid, with Dave and Jep we were able to have all the pieces fall into place.

"We have been having a pretty good year so far. We have had a few top 10 and top 5 results. We've had a few unfortunate things happen, like at Mosport, for instance. The threads that bolt the seat to the floor had stripped out 30 minutes into the race. When this happened, Don Salama in the Turner Motorsports car, and I in the Fresh From Florida car had checked out on the rest of the field with something like a 15 second lead. The seat started to come loose and then it actually broke. I had to come into the pits which cost us 15 laps while the guys had to drill the seat out and put a new nut and bolt through it. That was so frustrating. But overall we are fifth in the points so things aren't all that bad.

"Until this year, I hadn't really raced something with this much horsepower. But my goals going into the year were to have a number of top ten and top five finishes, maybe a podium or two and a pole or two. I would consider that an excellent year. And right now we are pretty close to that goal. But being a racer, you always want to do better than what your goals are.

"I think a top five in the championship is possible. We broke the track record at Watkins Glen and that was a real highlight. Doing well at the track was a plus, having grown up in upstate New York. And we just had a top five finish at Barber.

"I am having an excellent time! It is more than I could have ever imagined. To be running a full season in the KONI Challenge is giving me the time of my life. It's frustrating when you don't win or you have trouble but I always think this is just so darn cool to be running a BMW M3 against drivers like Bill Auberlen, Andy Lally, Boris Said, Scott Maxwell and all the famous guys you read about – sometimes beating them and other times getting passed by them. It has been awesome!"

And we think Tom Long's enthusiasm for racing is awesome.